The Epistemic and Axiological Significance of Experience

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Often experiences don’t just *describe* how our environments are—they *inherit* the value of objective features of the world. Imagine it’s August in lower Manhattan. You walk by a dumpster, one which is full of rotting garbage. It’s a putrid, permeating smell. The garbage itself is horrid—it would be terrible if it got on you. The *smell* is also *really bad*. Not only is the character of the experience intrinsically aversive, but you are worse off for undergoing it. So, it seems that the disvalue of the *garbage* is inherited by the *experience of the garbage*: one is bad because the other is bad.[[1]](#footnote-1) Consider a more pleasant experience. It’s April, but it’s been cloudy and cold and you’ve been working in your damp basement office. You walk outside into the garden to find the weather has shifted towards summer and the sky is blue. The feeling of warm sunlight on your skin is wonderful. In this case too, your experience, which is *of* something good, is itself *good*—the value of the experience again seems to be a function of the value of the objective circumstances.

In this paper I will propose that this norm, that experiences inherit the value of their objects, is an epistemic norm that governs perceptual experience. A different norm has been nearly universally taken to characterize experience—a representational norm, which says that experience *describes* how the world is: experiences conform to it when their contents are true or accurate. I will defend the view that the descriptive epistemic norm and the new epistemic norm, which I call ‘the axiological inheritance principle’ are distinct. Thus, the kind of phenomena that we observe in the examples—experiences with a positive or negative affective character—can be captured by the axiological inheritance principle (AIP) but not by the descriptive epistemic norm.

I will argue for my proposal by claiming that experiences that inherit the value of their objects have an *affective character*—an internal dimension of their phenomenology which is negative or positive, painful or pleasant, or neutral.[[2]](#footnote-2) Second, I’ll argue that affective character is *epistemically significant*—its source is external, and it enables subjects to make apt perceptual judgments.[[3]](#footnote-3) This amounts to a very different story about the epistemic significance of perceptual experiences than the one we normally tell. Roughly, this is because paradigm representations (or content-bearing states), which most theorists of perception model perception upon, do not inherit their value from the value of their objects. Rather, their epistemic value is derived from how well they represent or enable subjects to tell apart and differentially respond to distinct properties of their objects. I’ll argue that AIP it is not a matter of representing, descriptive adequacy, or telling things apart on the basis of distinct properties they have.

We can easily see why experiences—especially visual and auditory ones—seem to describe the world. We see that a ball is red, or a door is open, or hear that a note is flat. Though these experiences are sensuous, we can understand why their value to perceivers is typically taken to be ‘cognitive’, that is, a matter of being true or accurate relative to their objects. Representationalists, or proponents of *The Content View,* say that these experiences have *content* as a function of their *accuracy conditions*: if the ball *is* red, the door *is* open, or the note *is* flat, then those experiences obey the descriptive epistemic norm. Accordingly, a perception’s contents are both what make it epistemically significant and what explains their phenomenal character. Sometimes representationalists also appeal to the vehicle (or attitude, mode, or ‘mental paint’) of a representation to explain what the experience is like for the perceiver to undergo, but these attitudinal features are not what make the experience epistemically significant because their source is not external.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Despite its neglect by the dominant view, affective character seems to be a pervasive aspect of perception across the canonical sense modalities: vision, hearing, taste, smell, and touch.[[5]](#footnote-5) If affective character is epistemically significant and cannot be explained by the descriptive norm that is definitive of the content view, then we should not accept the cognitivist story about experience as full and sufficient. Instead, I propose that we accept AIP as another norm of experience. This is compatible with maintaining that experiences have content, but not with the view that content is a sufficient basis of experience’s epistemic role. I will suggest that AIP is more at home in a relationalist epistemic framework.

The plan for the paper is as follows. In §1 I offer four cases. I argue that, first, they exhibit the axiological inheritance principle. Second, that their affective character is epistemically significant. Third, that without reference to AIP, we cannot explain a significant class of perceptual judgments, namely, judgments of choice-worthiness. Fourth, that the case of pain experiences supports AIP, and AIP helps us to understand the epistemic significance of pain. Fifth, that AIP is irreconcilable with the ‘descriptive adequacy norm’ that is central to view that experience’s epistemic significance turns on content. And sixth, I contend that perceiving, which is perceiving evaluatively, is distinct from representing value. §2 I offer a relationalist framework that can accommodate AIP. In §3 I argue that three existing accounts of affective character are inadequate to the phenomena.

**§1 Relationalism and value**

My inquiry begins with the pre-theoretical observation that perceptual experiences can be good or bad, positive or negative, pleasant or unpleasant. It’s also notable that there is a good deal of science on how emotion, evaluation, and perception intertwine. For example, there is work that suggests that the emotional seat of the brain, the amygdala, which is responsible for the rapid and preferential processing of threat-relevant stimuli and for marking their evaluative salience in experience, plays a role in primary sensory processing, such as early vision.[[6]](#footnote-6) Though this empirical work is not my focus in this paper, the science and the pre-theoretical observation together demand that any theory of perception be responsive to affective perceptual phenomena.[[7]](#footnote-7)

First, some preliminaries about the concepts that figure in my argument and how to understand them. I work with a thin notion of *appearances* that is consistent with a wide range of accounts of perception. When a perceiver experiences an object, property, or relation (an ‘element’ in the world), they ‘enjoy’ or ‘undergo’ an appearance, which has a certain phenomenal character. Appearances are things like smells and sounds, visual appearances, tactile feels and tastes.

To say that appearances can have an affective character means that appearances can fall on a spectrum, constituted by strongly positive/attractive/pleasant experiences at one pole, neutral/indifferent experiences at the center, and strongly negative/aversive/unpleasant experiences at the other pole.[[8]](#footnote-8) As a matter of method I will focus on examples at the poles. This is intended only to make my points more salient, not to imply that they are different in kind from experiences at the center.

On my account, affective character, is a *determination-dimension* of other sensory aspects of perceptual appearances, in the same way that brightness is a determination-dimension of light.[[9]](#footnote-9)[[10]](#footnote-10) Like brightness, affective character cannot be instantiated independently of its determinable. And, being wholly dependent on its determinable, negative and positive experiences, qua experience *types*, have no particular phenomenal identity.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**1.1** **Experience inherits the axiological character of its objects**

I claim that experiences that exhibit affective character have a feature that distinguishes paradigm representations from perceptual states: they inherit the value of their objects.[[12]](#footnote-12) We can see this in a wide range of cases, extending from sophisticated instances of engagement with ethical and aesthetic properties to the primitive pleasures and pains that we share with relatively less sophisticated animals.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**Music:** *Breaking English* is a track by the artist Rafiq Bhatia.[[14]](#footnote-14) It combines traditional and dissonant chords, harmonic singing and architectural electronic elements while drawing on a wide range of influences, from Turkish prayer calls and jazz, to the Olduvai gorge of Tanzania.[[15]](#footnote-15) The experience of hearing it has a series of nuanced affective moments, some positive, some negative, that attunes us to the aesthetic purpose of these features. Overall, the experience of *Breaking English* has a positive affective character, which seems to be tied to specific aesthetic gestures within it.

**Orcas:** A pod of Orca whales were filmed hunting a sperm whale calf in a BBC documentary. The mother whale is unable to protect her baby from the Orcas because it cannot keep up her pace. The Orcas chase and kill the calf, but do not consume the body, (so it appears it was a cruel game to them).[[16]](#footnote-16) If one identifies with the calf’s or mother’s welfare, this is a visual representation of brutal harm. One’s visual experience of the harm may be strongly negatively valenced.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**Snail:** Imagine that you are a snail on a beach. You find yourself on a hot piece of sand, which burns you and leeches the moisture out of your body. It hurts! You navigate onto the underside of a smooth, damp rock. You feel great tactile relief.

**Coffee:** The coffee Sam prefers is dark, rich, and slightly bitter and it pairs nicely with a flaky chocolate croissant. The combination has a specific value to Sam based on her psychology, culture, and history. It’s hardly a rare preference, but it is personal. Eating the calorically dense croissant is straightforwardly delicious. The coffee is a more complicated case—its contrasting bitterness (a negative gustatory appearance), lends to other aspects of the experience, such as the flavor and texture contrast, which is overall strongly positive.

If we generalize over these cases we notice a deep pattern, which I’ll call the axiological inheritance principle (AIP):

**AIP: The axiological character of *an experience*** (whether it is beneficial of harmful to undergo) **is a function of the axiological character of *the object* of experience** (whether it is objectively beneficial or harmful relative to the subject).[[18]](#footnote-18)

I grant that AIP is schematic, nevertheless it we can see how the principle of inheritance captures something true to life about each of the cases:

In **music**, there are aesthetic values within the object *Breaking English,* and there are affective contours to the experience that reflect those values. The experience inherits both the transient negative and positive affective moments within the track, and value of the track as a whole.

In **orcas**, a tragedy occurs. The experience of it is, in a certain sense, harmful to the perceiver. It’s illustrative that we would fully understand why someone would wish to avoid watching the film to avoid this harm.

In **snail**, circumstances that affect the snail’s survival are directly reflected in the affective character of the experience. These benefits, though biological, are not *only* biological; if the snail has a welfare beyond its biology, then these circumstances matter in that way too. It is because the snail’s experience inherits the value of its objects that it is able to move in an intelligent way toward what is good and away from what is bad without having to *be* intelligent (that is, without having to understand the aims of its own movements). I take it to be a virtue of the principle that it shows us something that we may have in common with any other animal, just in virtue of our both being perceivers.

In **coffee**, there are, again, both biological values at issue (involving caloric energy and macronutrients) and aesthetic values (that of flavor, texture, and contrast).[[19]](#footnote-19) These are not separate at the level of appearances. The value of the coffee, which traces to ineffable objective features, namely its chemical composition, is inherited by its good taste, smell, and feel. Something similar to what goes on in **snail**occurs—a simple, biological benefit comes across as pleasure. But something like what goes on in **music** also occurs—a negative affective moment is part of the aesthetic character of the experience, which alerts the perceiver to something beyond the biological significance of the perceived object.

**1.2** **The epistemic significance of perception’s axiological character**

Here, I will argue that the affective character of appearances is a non-contingent feature of experience’s *epistemic* character.

For a phenomenal feature to be epistemically significant requires that (1) an epistemic basing relation obtains between the experience and its elements, such as that an experience *represents the elements*, *presents the elements*, or is *caused by the elements* and (2) that the experience stands ready to justify other epistemic states, such as perceptual beliefs. If the affective character of experience has both of these features, then it is part of what makes perception epistemically significant.

Later in the paper I will argue that affective character can be conceived of as the presentation of objective axiological relations such as benefit and harm. I will not argue here against views that are motivated to deny that point for distinct reasons. In this context we can be prima facie justified in accepting (1) insofar as there is evidence for (2). And we find (2) on display in each of the four sample cases: **music**, **orcas**, **snail**, and **coffee**.

Axiological character is essential to judgments of choice-worthiness, such as (as in **music**) believing that the track is good or choosing to listen to it. Were the peaks and valleys of affective character in *Breaking English* not available, the perceiver would not be able to make such judgments.

In **orcas**, it is possible to judge from visual experience that a harm has occurred. However, it is also plausible that one could reach this conclusion on the basis of a mere description of the case. Why think that the conclusion is not an inference based upon descriptive rather than affective dimensions of the experience? First, it may not be obvious that a harm has occurred from such a description, so the affective character may in fact be what the evaluative judgment hangs on. But even if it is, it is possible to cite the affective character of the experience as distinct justification from the description that a harm occurred.

**Snail** highlightsthe epistemic significance of affective character because it is a single point of failure for access to the axiological facts: without it the snail would plausibly lose its ability to navigate, spelling its demise. Even though humans have numerous addition sources of epistemic access to benefit and harm, and quite likely even ones that are grounded in the descriptive dimension of experience, unlike the snail, the possession of the same *direct* access to axiological relations that the snail has is plausibly still foundational to our ability to make evaluative judgments, such as judgments of choice-worthiness.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The metaphor of navigation is a helpful one for understanding how axiological character might be similarly relevant to humans—it might orient us to the contours of ubiquitous social and aesthetic landscapes, by cluing us in to various things that might matter to *us* given the kind of sophisticated beings that we are. For example, it plausibly mediates perceptual judgments of choice-worthiness in food, fashion, sex, friendship, and habitat (domains in which we rarely if ever engage in inferential reasoning from descriptive facts). Yet the epistemic norm by which that is possible might be just the same one that governs how a snail navigates the landscape of hopes and threats relative to its survival.

While the snail faces limited choices, we plausibly have more freedom. Our valenced experiences may serve as input to our reasoning about what to do or what is good ‘all things considered’.[[21]](#footnote-21) In other words, affective character’s epistemic significance can be an input to reasoning of many different kinds. Insofar as the kind of value that it reflects is relative to, not just the kind of being the perceiver is, but also other, more finely grained differences among human perceivers, this becomes especially plausible.

In **coffee,** the way in which we may sometimes be slightly similar to the snail in our pleasure-seeking is on display. I suggest that when we select food and drink we may make prominent use of the direct access that we have to axiological relations. We choose *this* coffee and *that* croissant because we expect that they will be good. (The sense of ‘good’ there is precisely that of perception’s axiological dimension.)

One could reasonably worry that these kinds of perceptions are not discerning, because their affective character is derived from our desires.[[22]](#footnote-22) The aim of this paper doesn’t require me to deny that conative states (or further affective or doxastic states for that matter) could contribute to affective character. This is because the reasons to think that affective character is epistemically significant are indifferent to their source. First, like other epistemically significant features of experience, affective character tends to vary with the independent axiological relevance of its objects, albeit fallibly (admitting of exceptions for deficient instances). That is, pain seems to non-arbitrarily track harm, and pleasure to non-arbitrarily track benefit. Second, only on the condition that affective character is epistemically significant would the axiological dimension of perception be adaptive. This generates an abductive argument that it is epistemically significant rather than incidental, granting that we have prima facie entitlement to accept that core perceptual features are adaptive. Third, affective character seems to be an independent force to organize our experience, orienting us to the situational relevance of whatever we encounter in the world. It is this, and the fact that insofar as it does, it demonstrably enables us to do things like select food and drink, participate in aesthetic practices, and navigate the social world.[[23]](#footnote-23) This suggests that if conative states are the source of affective character, they are to that extent discerning, not that affective character cannot be.

**1.3 The argument for AIP from pain**

It has been recognized that pain poses a problem for representationalist theories, because the suggestion that pain represents bodily damage, or even that bodily damage is bad for the subject, doesn’t seem adequate to explain the most distinctive fact about pain: that it *hurts.*[[24]](#footnote-24) The *painfulness* of pain is precisely what I have termed experience’s *affective character.* In pain’s case, the negative affective character can be as unbearable as the damage it represents is objectively intolerable.

In this paper I assume that bodily pain is a kind interoceptive (internally directed) perceptual experience. [[25]](#footnote-25) Though pain’s affective character is often more intense than that of other perceptual appearances, like other perceptions it also tells us about what is going on in (a special) part of the world: our own bodies. I employ the example of pain because it makes two key points especially clear. First, since pain is a form of harm itself, as well as being a way in which we discern harm, it is a paradigm instance of experience’s function as a conduit of value. Second, it is very plausible that the fact that pain hurts is essential to pain’s perceptual purpose of discerning harm, illustrating the idea that experience’s epistemic role can be a functionof its axiological value.

Consider this argument for AIP concerning the harm of bodily damage:[[26]](#footnote-26)

(P1) If *x* is *harmful* to the perceiver, the experience will signal that x is harmful through pain.

(P2) An experience that signals that x is harmful through pain is a *painful* experience.

(P3) If an experience is painful, it is in that respect harmful to the subject, all else being equal.

(C1) If x is harmful to the perceiver, the experience of x is harmful to the subject. (from (P2) and (P3))

(C) An experience of x inherits the disvalue of x. (from (C1))

The argument relies on two plausible assumptions. First, that someone in pain is worse off that someone not in pain, all else being equal. This doesn’t mean that all pain is bad generally speaking, it merely implies that pain’s intrinsic quality is intrinsically bad. Its extrinsic or instrumental properties may yet be good, so its overall value is indeterminate. The second assumption is that affect and value are primitively connected: pain is the signature of harm, relative to consciousness. This point is widely accepted across several literatures in philosophy and psychology.[[27]](#footnote-27)

**1.4 Affective character’s epistemic significance is different**

AIP pinpoints something that is disanalogous between perceptual states and paradigm representational states, like beliefs. Representationalists they accept that ‘percepts’, like beliefs and other paradigm representational states, are truth-apt cognitive states, which are governed by a descriptive accuracy norm.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Susanna Siegel, a prominent advocate of the content view, explains: “The notion of representation is tied to the idea that experiences have contents, where contents are a kind of condition under which experiences are accurate, similar in many ways to the truth-conditions of beliefs. I call this thesis the Content View…Beliefs are paradigms of mental states that can be true or false.”[[29]](#footnote-29) It is common among proponents of the content view to hold that the epistemic significance of perceptual experience is reducible to that of belief. The central reason they cite is that, like beliefs, perceptions have accuracy conditions. That is, if it seems to me in experience that the rug is blue, my experience is accurate if the rug is blue and inaccurate otherwise—if the rug really has the properties that the contents ascribe to it, then it is accurate. The contents of an experience are in some ways intuitively like the contents of a newspaper, according to an analogy that Siegel employs—they too describe the world as being one way rather than another.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Another proponent of the content view, Susanna Schellenberg, tells us more about what makes these contents or accuracy conditions important in perception: “representing perceived particulars is a matter of employing perceptual capacities by means of which one *discriminates* and *singles out* those particulars.”[[31]](#footnote-31) (emphasis mine) Being in a state with the content that the rug is blue is different from being in a state with the content that the chair is blue or that the rug is pink. In virtue of being in one of those content-bearing states rather than another, the subject has discriminated between objects that have the properties ‘blue’ or ‘rug’ and those that do not. Perception, plausibly, is one of our most basic capacities for discriminating objects. Thus, the content view vindicates that conception. Further, telling things apart is a precondition on being able to single them out—to *point* to the blue rug rather than the pink one, or to form the singular judgment ‘*that* rug is blue’, abilities that we plausibly have as a function of being perceivers.

Content is commonly taken to fully characterize the connection between what an experience is like subjectively and its epistemic role.[[32]](#footnote-32) It is especially in this respect that proponents of the content view are ready to equate belief and perception. Just as the content of a belief dictates what transitions the subject is licensed to make to other epistemic states, the content of an experience determines which perceptual judgments the perceiver is justified in making. My experience of the rug as blue speaks to why I may be justified in believing the rug is blue. Call this the ‘cognitivist conception’ of experience’s epistemic significance.

The idea that inheriting the value of their objects is also part of what makes experiences epistemically significant poses a challenge to the sufficiency of the cognitivist conception. In effect, AIP suggests that a distinct epistemic norm may govern experience. The challenge to sufficiency will thus be satisfied if we can show that the norms are different.

Here is my hypothesis:

The norm that is essential to the content view’s picture centrally concerns *descriptive epistemic* *adequacy* (properties that a perceiver experiences have to be correctly described). Descriptive adequacy is *comparative* (about telling distinct things apart); *cognitive* (generates descriptions which are truth-apt, i.e. contents); and it is independent of primitive axiological relations like the ones that connect pain and harm, pleasure and benefit (a description of harm need not be painful).

In contrast, the kind of epistemic norm that the AIP captures is not comparative (painfulness and pleasantness may fail to distinguish something as being better than or worse than another thing); is not cognitive (painfulness and pleasantness have no truth-conditions because they neither describe nor compare); but it *is* invariably governed by the primitive axiological connections (apt experiences of harm inherit the disvalue of their objects and apt experiences of benefit inherit the value of theirs).

The notion that affective character is not comparative is especially helpful in distinguishing the norms. When something is pleasant or painful, this does not typically allow us to single out what makes it pleasant or painful. Affective character alone is incapable of pinpointing what properties make the object harmful or beneficial. For instance, we might be oblivious what it is about the coffee that makes it pair well with a croissant, we just have a sense that they are delicious together. Similarly, physical pain alerts us that something is wrong, but we may well need to go to a physician to figure out *what* exactly is wrong. It is in this way that affective character is *discerning* without being *discriminating.*

**1.5** **Perceiving evaluatively is not representing value**

The hypothesis that there is more than one epistemic norm at play predicts that representing values or evaluative properties (descriptive adequacy relative to values or evaluative properties specifically) would be different than undergoing experiences governed by the AIP (some kind of axiological adequacy relative to anything’s axiological relation to the perceiver). That is in fact what we find.

Dustin Stokes and Paul Noordhof are proponents of the view that some perceptual experiences are accurate only if they represent evaluative properties.[[33]](#footnote-33) On Stokes’ view, aesthetic properties like ‘impressionistic’ can figure in perceptual contents thusly: “Impressionist paintings are typified by a number of perceptible features: highlighting of natural light and reflection; a regular (but not categorical) use of lighter colours; identifiable quick, short strokes of paint; an emphasis on a scene rather than any one figure or group of figures; use of angles and composition creating a candid rather than posed depiction of people and events. To know impressionism, is to know and respond to some cluster of these features.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Noordhof considers how to account for the negative affective character of pain as a representation of the prudential (dis)value of damage to the body. He offers: “[T]he awfulness of pain is represented by a creature’s pain experience involving, as part of its representational properties, the disposition to have a distinctive aversive response: attempting to rid itself of the pain in certain specified ways W in circumstances C, and so on.” As on Stokes’ view, what represents (in this case the dispositions) are non-affective.

Both theorists are wrestling with what could possibly make the representation specifically evaluative. Neither appeals to affective character: both the artistic features that mark the painting as ‘impressionistic’ and the dispositions are non-evaluative features. Stokes suggests that the ability to discriminate a broad host of descriptive features, upon which the painting’s evaluative property depends, counts as the representation of value. Noordhof, in contrast, cites a disposition which seems to have something to do with pain’s affective character (its tendency to cause subjects to try to escape it) and tries to get value into the representation by identifying this disposition with the representation itself. Both views are contrived and unconvincing relative to the phenomena.

Often our meaningful engagement with an artwork does not require that we discriminate a broad host of descriptive features upon which its value depends. Rather, when we experience the art we *feel* its value, regardless of whether we also attend to these descriptive features. On AIP, what makes the experience of the artwork sensitive to its value is that it inherits the artwork’s axiological relationship to the perceiver. Nor can pain’s negative affective character be explained by the puzzling identification of perceptual representations with dispositions to flee or cringe. Similarly, the distinctive badness of pain is explained directly by the axiological relation of (e.g.) tissue damage to the subject.

**Snail** also illustrates why perceiving evaluatively cannot be representing value. Let’s suppose that the snail is very intellectually primitive and cannot grasp that the hot sand is bad or the damp rock is good per se, even at the level of perception. What truth-apt representations could it possibly have that would explain its ability to intelligently navigate from the sand to the rock? The answer might be that it has none. AIP explains: these perceptual states are *apt* because they are discerning, but not truth-apt, because they lack content.[[35]](#footnote-35) Plausibly, the snail also lacks comparative dimensions of value, i.e. better and worse, which again, AIP can explain, but the content view cannot.

Many theorists have been attracted by the possibility of explaining affective character as the representation of contents *in an evaluative way.* I have only argued against the possibility that evaluative contents are (on their own) capable of accounting for the phenomena. However, once this is established, the prospect of accounting for them by appeal to attitude, vehicle, or mode is unpromising. That’s because the epistemic significance of a representation hinges on how its contents depend on objective accuracy conditions. No matter what *way* content is represented, by definition its accuracy conditions are unchanged. Thus, to be of help, the attitudinal view must either defeat the three arguments for affective character’s epistemic significance I advanced in 1.2 or find a way to explain the epistemic significance of attitude without appeal to content (including the content of other states, such as emotions, attitude, or desires, since that would only generate a regress).

In summary, affective character is recalcitrant to explanation by versions of the content view that relies on a cognitivist epistemology. I have challenged the sufficiency of the representationalist conception of perception by claiming that AIP is a distinct epistemic norm. And I’ve argued that views like Stokes’ and Noordhof’s are inadequate to the phenomena for this reason.

§**2 Relationalism is a more accommodating framework for AIP**

*Relationalism* is a framework for perception that conceives of the perceptual relation as sui generis.[[36]](#footnote-36) Relationalists generally accept that elements are *presented* to a subject in experience and that these elements *constitute* perception’s phenomenology. [[37]](#footnote-37) Relationalists’ way of explaining epistemic significance is *non-cognitivist*, since it doesn’t explain it by reference to appearances being either true or false relative to its objects, though they may accept that experiences have content.[[38]](#footnote-38)

This framework is well suited to embrace the inheritance principle. If not just the *objects* of experience, but also their *values* relative to the perceiver, constitute the experience, it makes sense that the experience could have the same value relative to the perceiver that the object does. I.e., the views say parallel things about experience in general and evaluative experience: where AIP says that experiences inherit the value of their objects, relationalist says that experiences inherit whatever they are like from elements in virtue of being constituted by them. Thus, there is nothing incompatible between AIP and relationalism.

Relationalists commitment to appearances being constituted by objects raises a prima facie worry that affective character cannot be identified with the character of perceived elements. Consider **snail**—ifwe identify the character of perceived elements with affective character it entails that *pleasure* is a property of damp rocks or that *pain* a property of hot sand.[[39]](#footnote-39)

A version of the view that avoids the worry holds that the relation between the perceiver and the elements as well as the elements themselves can contribute to the character of experience. It views the contribution of the perceiver to the relation as accounting for the difference between an element (such as harm) and its appearance (pain).[[40]](#footnote-40) The version of the view that I advocate also places a limit on the extent of this contribution: pain must manifest a negative affective character (and pleasure a positive affective character) for the appearance not to be a defective instance. This ‘resemblance requirement’ preserves the plausibility of the claim that constitution grounds the epistemic significance of appearances.

§**3 Current accounts of experience’s axiological character are inadequate**

Though the affective character of perception is a much-neglected feature of perception, there have been efforts to theorize it within the representationalist framework. These views break down along two important lines: (1) whether affective character is epistemically significant, and (2) whether the basis of its epistemic significance is *content* or *attitude*.

According to the *Attitudinal-Representational Theory* (ART)*,* defended by Hilla Jacobson, affective character is not epistemically significant, and its source is attitudinal. The valence of the experience is determined by the perceiver’s conative states (desires, needs, wishes). Jacobson argues that affective character thus has a world-to-mind ‘direction of fit’: they reflect how the perceiver *wants the world to be* rather than how the world is. In principle, Jacobson could have held that affective character is also discerning, but her stated view is not consistent with that position—it rests on an argument that affective character does not covary with any putative values.

Jacobson’s argument against affective character turns on restricting the domain of objective relational values to *biological* values, which is ad hoc.[[41]](#footnote-41) Realists about the good countenance individuals, not just humans as a species, and they conceive of the good broadly, as involving, among other things, art, knowledge, pleasure and justice. Without this restriction in place there is no further reason to accept that affective character cannot covary with relational value. The chief motivation for ART is the denial of the possibility that affective character is epistemically significant.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Another view, *The Layered-Attitude Model*, has been recently defended by Frederique de Vignemont. It putatively supports the epistemic significance of affective character and also proposes that it a function of attitude, rather than content. The view holds that a subject’s affective visual experience consists in both (1) a visual representation of the world and (2) an evaluative attitude directed toward what is seen that is bound with the visual experience.[[43]](#footnote-43) Because they become bound to the perceptual content, they color it in negative or positive ways, accounting for its valence.

Views like this are motived by counterexamples to content’s ability to capture affectivity (those which find explanation in AIP). In her words, experiences with bad things in their contents can ‘leave the subject cold’. She asserts that assigning affective character to attitude will make the difference: “What matters, indeed, is how the rally driver relates to his non-conceptual badness content. Merely seeing things as being bad is not the same as seeing them negatively.” In section 1.5 I argued that there is a principled barrier to this approaching helping to explain affective character. Additionally, de Vignemont’s view is in jeopardy of generating a vicious regress unless it offers a deeper explanation of affective character’s distinctively pleasant and painful character: if she claims that the non-perceptual attitude which is *layered* onto the perception is itself epistemically significant due to its content, she will merely have pushed the problem back a level. (What will make *that* content affective? And why couldn’t it be the content *of the perception* rather than the layered attitude?) In contrast, because my view points us to a non-cognitive epistemic norm, it responds to the source of the regress.

Accounting for affective character, as an epistemically significant feature, is most naturally achieved by reference to content. Views that attempt this face a variety of serious objections: (1) They lack principled explanations of why affective character is affective or ‘hot’; (2) They make implausible predictions about the discriminations that animals are able to make perceptually; (3) They mischaracterize what it is like to engage with art; and (4) they fail to bridge the ethical domain with perception in a naturalistically plausible way. I have argued that, by adopting the axiological inheritance principle as an epistemic norm on experience we have a new resource to address all of these problems.

Visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory, and tactile appearances are ubiquitously affectively valenced, especially when you note that they may also be neutrally valenced. Thus, I suggest in this paper that perceivers are invariably evaluating simply by perceiving. I have argued that representations do not inherit their value from their objects, and so are not inherently evaluative. Though perceptions may be likerepresentations in other ways, they are importantly different from them in this crucial respect.

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1. I grant that this description admits of many exceptions, that is, cases in which the value of an experience’s object does not match the value of the experience. In light of the significant covariance and evidence of epistemic significance, I suggest that we regard these exceptions as deficient cases, which is merely evidence of fallibility of the capacity, rather than the inapplicability of the principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The ‘internal’ affective character of phenomenology does not determine whether the experience itself is pleasing or painful *in general*, that is, whether one has the affective attitude or emotion of being pleased or pained *in response* to the experience. I take it that any range of emotions or attitudes are compatible with any perceptual phenomenology, under the relevant circumstances. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In saying that affective character’s source is external, I meant that it is at least partly external. This is meant to rule out that its source is wholly internal, not that it lacks other inputs. Throughout the paper I use the terms ‘epistemically significant’ and ‘discerning’ interchangeably. By these I mean that some feature of experience is grounded in some objective element x, such that it stands to guide judgments about x. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Representationalism comes in many varieties. On *strong* representationalism, contents exhaust the character of experience, while on *weak* representationalism both the contents of experience and the vehicle contribute to the experience’s character. The arguments I put forward apply to both positions, because both characterize experience in terms of only the descriptive epistemic norm. More specifically, I am not hopeful that the appeal to attitude to explain affective character has good prospects of explaining why it enables the perceiver to make apt perceptual judgments (even if it suffices to explain why it has the phenomenal character that it does). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jacobson, 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Barbot and Carrasco 2018; Pourtois, Schettino, & Vuilleumier, 2013; Pessoa & Adolphs 2010; Vuilleumier 2005. For evidence that visual perception is valenced, see Sophie Lebrecht 2012; Lebrecht, Bar, Barrett & Tarr 2012; and Lebrecht & Tarr 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. There is a richer literature on *emotion* and its relationship to value than on perception’s relationship to value. Notably, there are theorists who say that emotion *is* the perception of value (Prinz 2004; Döring 2007;

   Tappolet 2016). I will constrain my inquiry in this paper to the topic of *perception’s* affective character exclusively. Correspondingly, throughout, my references to affect and feeling are restricted to an internal dimension of sensory perceptual phenomenology. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Neutral* affectively valenced experiences are those that inherit that their objects stand in no distinctively beneficial or harmful relation to the perceiver. They can be distinguished from non-valenced experiences, which are not determined in the dimension of affective character and thus convey nothing about the axiological relation of the object to the perceiver. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This ‘other sensory aspect’ of appearances is only nominally distinct from the affective character. We can think of it as the aspect of the appearance that discriminates garbage *as garbage* through the modality of smell, as opposed to the aspect that is negative or aversive. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I follow Jacobson (2021) in characterizing affective character as a determination-dimension. The determinable-determinate relation is such that a determinate exclusively characterizes objects relative to a certain determinable. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Pace Jacobson 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I use both the term ‘object’ and the term ‘element’ interchangeably, to mean things that experience is directed at. ‘Elements’ is a bit of technical vocabulary that I adopt in order to be able to simultaneously reference ordinary objects (tables, people, streetlights), properties (red, wide, rough), and relations (being to the left of, being absent from, being good for, harming, belonging to). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The view that I hold is that the value that experience relays is value relative to the perceiver. The affective character of a given experience thus depends in part on whose experience it is. Thus, these examples are volunteered only as hypotheticals relative to a given perceiver. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Listen to it here!: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMv-c11hCCE [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/arts/music/rafiq-bhatia-breaking-english-son-lux.html [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Though this is an artwork too, and can be assessed as an experience of an artwork, the case could also be rendered such that one witnesses the event first-hand. Both such versions have the relevant feature of inheritance, I think. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. There is a fair question of whether the value in this example is value *relative to the perceiver*. I prefer a view on which the harm that befalls the whale calf redounds to other beings in a sphere of concern, perhaps one that we enter when we watch the film. So, although the harm concerned here is obviously not *direct* harm to the perceiver, it may nevertheless harm them. Given this, AIP can still be applied consistently across the cases. If one rejects the premise that indirect harm could be inherited by experience, one may run the argument with reference only to the other three cases. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. There are some implications of the principle that might generate certain worries. One would be that (e.g.) the musical elements in a track are not harmful or beneficial independently of the experience; another is that there is a need to determine the scope of objective harms to which experience is sensitive; another that it is inapt to call the experience itself harmful or beneficial when the experience is either trivial (as in Sam’s experience) or instrumental (as in the snail’s experience). I believe there are good responses to these concerns, but I will not be able to get to them here. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. What underlies the pleasantness of coffee overall? Certain ineffable chemical signatures, presumably, which happen to matter to the individual due to cultural and psychological factors. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. These additional channels could be emotional or intellectual. There could also be additional perceptual access to axiologically relevant facts based on non-affective or descriptive elements, which, in light of background knowledge, could license *inferential* evaluative judgments on the basis of perception. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. As I see it, perception is a capacity that is prior to the division between the theoretical and the practical domains, since it guides theoretical and practical judgments alike. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Jacobson 2014, 2021 for a developed form of this objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. In 1.4 I will offer reasons to accept that its epistemic significance is not consistent with its being a *description* of the value of things. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Michael Tye 1997 and 2015; David Bain 2013 and 2017; Aydede & Fulkerson 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The reason to treat pain as perceptual, unlike mere reactions to the environment, e.g. sneezing when there is pollen in the air, is that pain resembles its objects sufficiently, and is related to them in a way governed by epistemic norms. For views that pain is perceptual or has imperatival content see Pitcher 1970; Richard Hall 2008; Colin Klein 2011; Manolo Martínez 2011, 2013; and Cutter & Tye 2011. For a discussion of the empirical literature on pain’s relation to perception see Auvray, Myin & Spence (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. A parallel argument could be made for pleasurable experiences, on the assumptions that (1) someone undergoing pleasure is better off than someone not undergoing pleasure, all else being equal and (2) that pleasure is the way that perceivers discern benefit. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. I set to the side the topic of pain’s motivational character. For the purposes of this paper, I seek to understand the epistemic significance of affective character independently of its motivational significance. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Siegel 2010a, 2010b [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Siegel 2010b. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Siegel 2010b, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Schellenberg 2018, p. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See Siegel & Silins 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Bergqvist and Cowan p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Stokes 2018, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. On the contrast between these ‘aptic’ categories see Selim Berker forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See Wilson & Locatelli [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. M.G.F. Martin 2002, 2004; Campbell 2002; Travis 2004; William Fish 2009; Bill Brewer 2006, 2007, 2011; Logue 2012; Genone 2014; Sethi 2021, forthcoming; Beck 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See Siegel 2010b; McDowell 2013; Logue 2014; Schellenberg 2017, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Phenomenal externalism extends on a spectrum, with some relationalists being *more permissive* and others *less permissive* of with respect to how closely matched phenomenal character and the character of perceived elements must be to identify one with the other. For example, if a white ball appears pink at sunset, a *permissive* relationalist might say that pink is a just a *way* that the ball’s white color appears (requiring a kind of loose match), while an *impermissive* relationalist might say that *pinkness* is an ‘appearance-property’ of the white ball (requiring a tight match). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. There is compelling precedent for this form of moderation among a rising movement of ‘new wave’ relationalists: Logue 2012; French 2013; Beck 2018; French and Phillips 2020; Sethi, forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Biological values are ones that involve the perceiver’s survival or fitness qua member of a species. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Jacobson 2021, p. 524. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Thus, an evaluative attitude *beyond the sensory representation* determines the affective character of a perception. For all we know, these ‘affective attitudes’ or emotions could be discerning of value, though DeVignemont neither argues that they are. (Nor is she explicit that affective character is epistemically significant, though her argument implies that it is.) [↑](#footnote-ref-43)